

A Sermon
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Golden Rule, Golden Opportunity

Matthew 7:7-12

"Do unto others. . . ." Many of you can finish that verse from memory. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." We often call it the Golden Rule. "Golden," I assume, because of its high ethical value. And "Rule" because it's such a succinct statement of what it means to live righteously.

Though we interpret the Golden Rule within the context of the Christian faith, it's important to note that other religious traditions have teachings that convey a similar message. In Hinduism, there's a text that says, "Men gifted with intelligence and purified souls should always treat others as they themselves wish to be treated." An important Buddhist text says, "Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful." Confucius was once asked for a single word to sum up the rules of life. He answered, "Is not reciprocity such a word? What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others." In Islam, there's a teaching which says, "No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself." So when we survey the landscape of other religions, we see that doing for others is a recurring theme for people of various faith traditions.¹

In today's text from Matthew, the Golden Rule appears as the climax and conclusion of a long section in which Jesus has been teaching about how the reality of God's kingdom is to be lived out in the community of his followers (5:17-7:11). "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets" (v. 12).

That last phrase, "the Law and the Prophets," is a way of referring to the whole of Jewish Scripture. So when we listen to what Jesus is saying, we need to remember that he wasn't operating in a vacuum. He was part of a larger social and religious setting in which various teachings and traditions were debated and discussed, always with an eye toward how God's people should live righteous lives. In fact, the Golden Rule wasn't original to Jesus. This basic teaching, with slight variations, is found in other Jewish sources. For instance, in one text we have a similar teaching: "And what you hate, do not do to anyone" (Tobit 4:15). Another parallel is found in a story about two rabbis. A gentile came before Rabbi Shammai and said to him, "Make me a proselyte, on condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot." But the rabbi sent him away. The gentile then went to Rabbi Hillel with the same request. Hillel said to him, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is commentary thereon; go and learn it."

We shouldn't be surprised that Jesus found himself in situations where he was called upon to take the faith and life of the people of Israel and boil it all down to what was most essential. This is the core of the righteousness that the Lord expects. This is God's Word in a nutshell. This is what it all comes down to.

One person tells about a conversation he overheard in which the head of a university's astronomy department was speaking to the dean of the divinity school. The astronomy professor said, "Now, let's face it. In religion, what it all boils down to very simply is that

you should love your neighbor as you love yourself. It's the Golden Rule, right?" "Yes, I suppose that's true," replied the dean of the divinity school. "Just as in astronomy it all boils down to one thing—'Twinkle, twinkle, little star.'"²

True, there's more to astronomy than just that, just as there's more to Christian theology than just the Golden Rule. But across time, the church has viewed this summary as a reliable guide to knowing and doing the will of God in everyday life. "Do to others as you would have them do to you."

It's one thing to memorize the Golden Rule, and to affirm that it's central to Christian faith and practice. But it's another thing to interpret it and apply it within the complexity of life's relationships and issues, both within and beyond the fellowship of disciples. Notice that Jesus isn't just talking about how we relate to others within the community of faith. "Do to *others*" doesn't refer just to fellow believers. "Others" has to do with human beings in general. According to Jesus, the Golden Rule isn't just an in-house guideline. It's actually designed to shape all of our human relationships, those within the church, certainly, but those beyond the church as well. This means that our daily lives are filled with golden opportunities to implement the Golden Rule.

Wherever you're applying the Golden Rule, it's designed to ground your decisions and actions in love for others. Keep in mind what Jesus says later in Matthew's Gospel when asked which is the greatest commandment in the Law. Jesus replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (22:37-40). Now, the difference between this summary and the Golden Rule doesn't mean that Jesus has changed his mind or his message. The two passages actually shed light on each other. In both cases, Jesus says that what matters most is discerning and doing the loving thing for others.

That requires knowing the other person to at least some degree. Knowing their needs. Knowing their circumstances and their perspective. Knowing their story, as much as this is possible. You learn these kinds of things by listening, by asking good questions, by staying open to the other person's life. And then, by knowing these kinds of things, you're better able to imagine yourself into the other person's circumstances, and so to ask, "How do I desire that I be treated if I were in that situation?" By taking this kind of approach to others, you help ensure that your actions are truly focused on what's good for them, without concern for what you may get out of it as well.

Preacher John Claypool once told the following story about a man who was on the verge of celebrating his fortieth birthday:

His wife loved him very much, so she decided that she would secretly prepare a big surprise birthday party. She got a large room in a hotel; she booked a jazz combo that she liked very much. She got word to four hundred of their best friends to come at a certain time but not to tell him anything about it. She was able to pull off the whole thing.

The night of his birthday he was genuinely surprised as all of these people gathered to celebrate his life. By all reports it was a spectacular success. Everybody had a wonderful time. The hostess and the main honoree stayed until well after midnight. And when it was all over, they went home. They kicked off their shoes and the husband looked her deep in her eyes and thanked her for all the effort, for all the work she had done to make that night special.

He said, "I will always appreciate it." But then he said, "I need to say one more thing to you. You are the one who has always loved big parties. You have always known that I was a person who liked small gatherings of people, quiet enough so that we could exchange ideas." He said, "The party tonight was wonderful but it really was your kind of party and not my kind of party."

You see, she had lived out the golden rule perfectly. She had done for her husband exactly what she would have liked for him to do for her but she had not listened to his heart. She had listened to her own life, but she hadn't listened to the enthusiasms and individualities of his heart.³

Claypool uses this story to illustrate a rule that actually goes beyond the Golden Rule. He calls it the Platinum Rule: "Do unto others as they would like to have done unto them." This shifts our attention even more to the other person. I don't know if we need another rule beyond the Golden Rule, but I do understand what Claypool is saying. He's saying that when you make decisions about how to treat another person, you should think not only about what you would want if you were that person, you should also work hard at getting to know that person so that you really do have a deep sense of their circumstances, their needs, and their perspective.

This becomes even more critical in our contemporary setting where discussions, particularly political ones, can get so divisive, and we're quick to label or categorize others without really trying to understand who they are and where they're coming from. A few years ago, one organization developed a statement that they encouraged people of faith to sign in an effort to rally around the Golden Rule and allow it to guide our discussions at the intersection of faith and politics. For example, Christians who signed it pledged that, "As I seek to apply the Golden Rule to political discussions, some of the things I will do are":

- Always show respect for the other person
- Acknowledge the limits of my own understanding
- Listen patiently, especially when there is disagreement
- Use precise language that communicates my views without exaggeration
- Try to understand the experience out of which the other person arrived at his/her views
- Look for areas of mutual agreement
- Pray for the other person and our political leaders⁴

That's just one example of how to apply the Golden Rule to our thinking and our conversation about matters of public policy.

Another area where we need to consider the implications of the Golden Rule would be technology, specifically our engagement with others online. What does "Do to others what you would have them do to you" mean when you're on social media? How should "the Law and the Prophets" govern your behavior when you're on Instagram? How can you love your neighbor when the two of you are logged in? One possible answer was captured on a church sign that read: "Tweet Others as You Want Them to Tweet You."

"So in everything" is the way Jesus begins today's climactic verse. Everything. Everything from your conduct at church to your conduct in your home. Everything from your conversations at work to your conversations online. Everything from how you cast your vote to how you to how you treat your friends. Everything from your attitude toward immigrants to your actions toward your spouse. Everything from your driving habits to your spending habits. "In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you." Not because the Golden Rule is the way to earn God's favor or merit his mercy, but because, as

Jesus says in the verse right before it, your Father in heaven is good, and responsive, and caring, and loving. And those who are the Father's children will reflect his character and practice his righteousness in all their dealings with others.

¹ Roger Shinn, "The Sermon on the Mount." Accessed February 26, 2009 <<http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=1113&C=1191>>. See also <<http://www.answers.com/topic/golden-rule>> (Accessed February 26, 2009).

² Bruce Larson, in Faith for the Journey. Christianity Today, Vol. 31, no. 2.

³ Claypool says he first heard this story in a book by Harville Hendrix. Claypool included it in his sermon, "The Platinum Rule." Accessed February 26, 2009 <http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/claypool_3630.htm>.

⁴ Ed Stetzer, "Faith and Politics: Living the Golden Rule." The Exchange website. July 23, 2014. Accessed August 15, 2019 < <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2014/july/faith-and-politics-living-golden-rule.html>>.